"McMURRAY INTO THE 80's"

A CONCEPT OF PURPOSE FOR ALBERTA'S NEWEST CITY

The document entitled "Perceptions and Realities" attempts to portray the state of McMurray at the conclusion of the Syncrude construction phase, at a time when the municipality aspires to shed its "New Town" cloak after fifteen years, to become the next Alberta city.

McMurray abounds in classic understatements. The term "rapid growth" has taken on a new dimension in this community, to the point where a 10 or 15 per cent annual growth rate would be now perceived as "normal" growth. The cliche "dramatic change" also qualifies as an understatement, as does the term "boom". It is little wonder that the citizens of Alberta and Canada are continually somewhat in arrears in a perceptual way, as the residents of the community itself oftentimes find it difficult to keep pace with new developments and change, where such are now as expected, as is the status quo in most Canadian settlement areas.

The observation has been made many times that a community which is always in a "catch-up" mode would never really have the time, energy, inclination or inspiration to devote itself in a meaningful way to either planning or studies of municipal goals and objectives. The general impression in the Alberta south is that McMurray has experienced "uncontrolled growth" and has been, for several years, "out of control". These impressions were reinforced by the frantic construction phase both within the community (reaching to almost $100 million per year) and in the surrounding countryside (representing about 25 per cent of Alberta's industrial development during the Syncrude construction phase).

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These impressions and perceptions are dictated by most everyone's experiences with such matters, and they are rarely incorrect in fact. In northern or southern boom towns, the existing residents, transients and minorities are often left behind in the dust. General Plans are usually an afterthought, being something which someone decides eventually should be done, and then being simply an affirmation in writing of what is already in place. Citizen involvement in decision making is of course a final consideration, if considered at all. The New Towns Act, for example, legally removes the municipality from the general municipal requirements for citizen input to capital expenditures.

We will have little success in convincing Albertans or Canadians that this scenario was not accurate in the severe growth years of 1975-78. We do feel that we may have more success in an effort to detail the goals, objectives, and purposes of this very new community on the threshold of city status. If we can be afforded, at this point, the consensus that we have in place the basic physical and social infrastructure to ensure that we, as a community have the resources to plan our future, then we will have at least an audience that is prepared to consider and evaluate the general statements to follow, or the shape of McMurray to be as it enters the second last decade of the twentieth century.

Our approach will be to jump twenty years into the future to draw a picture of the northeast Alberta region in the year 2000, and then to backtrack to 1980 to show how far towards this end product we will move in the next decade.

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McMURRAY 2000: A POSSIBLE FUTURE

The City of Fort McMurray, a community of 150,000 persons in northern Alberta, straddles the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers and serves as regional centre to an additional 75,000 people located in four smaller communities within 100 miles of McMurray.

It is spring, in the year 2000, and the E.R.C.B. is meeting in the city to review the current proposal from a ten party consortium to develop the area's eighth oil sands plant, this current proposal being that of a project to produce 250,000 barrels/day. This project will add a fifth new town to the region which will itself have a planned population of 20,000. The proposal envisages a regional refinery operation to handle products from all regional plants, with products to be shipped south for specific distribution. The new environmental legislation introduced in the 1990's effectively will close all urban area refineries within the decade and the suggested refinery operation is expected to be only the first of several to come.

Northern Alberta now has a comprehensive road and mass transit system, and it has been some years since the region was connected to Peace River, Fort Chipewyan and Northern Saskatchewan. The mutual development between Alberta and Saskatchewan of the uranium and coal deposits in both areas was instrumental in opening up the general area to development, and the current onslaught of secondary industry is a reflection of both the tough urban environmental rules and the abundant water and energy available locally.

The very significant labour force in the northern areas of both provinces has given rise to the current discussions for a climate controlled resort in a new town straddling the Alberta-Saskatchewan border.

Fort McMurray, as the administrative centre for Western Canadian non-conventional oil industry, boasts the divisional office at this time of over two dozen international corporations and governments - mission offices are operated in the city by the governments of Japan, the Soviet Union, the United States and a variety of other lesser powers.

Area 4, which operated for five years as the autonomous Clearwater City, was amalgamated into McMurray very recently. It boasts a university area which contains the major research and development facility for non-conventional oil in the world. The computer facilities within the university complex have recently been tapped into all industrial computer services, making the system the most extensive and complex in North America in the industrial category.

Industrial development as related to the oil sands is comprised of five mining operations and three in situ plants, two of the latter being south of McMurray. The by-product developments are also of increasing significance, with direct utilization being found for coke, sulphur, salt, carbon dioxide and sand. A commercial venture for the extraction of trace elements from plant tailings is also now under development.

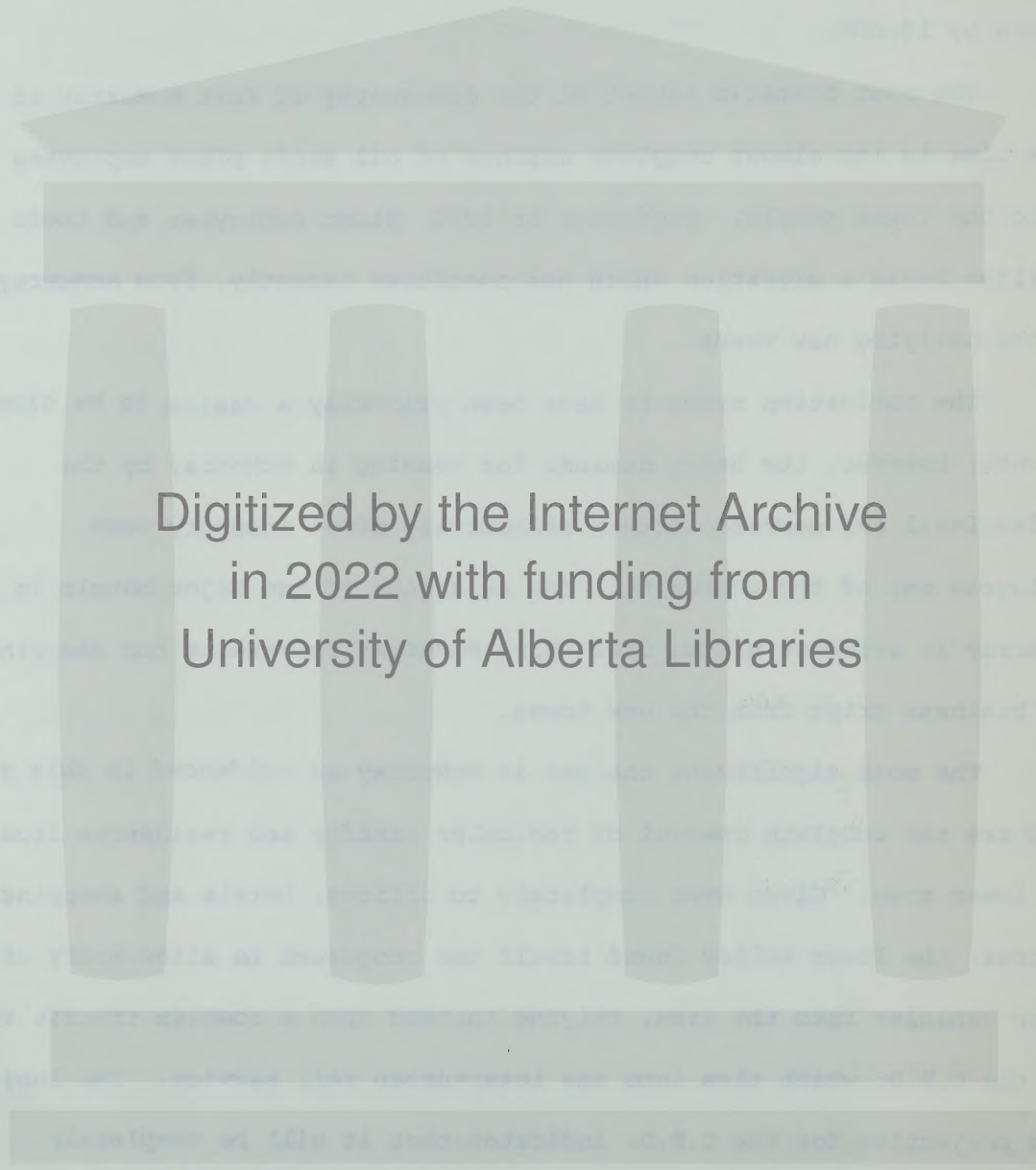
The most pressing issue facing the McMurray Regional Planning Commission at this time is to effect the Provincial Government's demand for a 100,000 acre recreational reserve in the region, where oil operations and town sites now dot the region. All non-productive land is being held in reserve for either residential or secondary development, resulting in a net availability of zero acres aside from non-developable lands. The current concern is for an over development of the entire region, while little hope is held for meeting Environment and Recreation requirements for a substantial reserve parcel to be established as a Provincial Park. This difficulty is expected to have some impact at the current hearings on the 250,000 barrel plant.

There are also concerns being expressed at this time about the 25,000+ transient work force in the area who work as both a labour pool to the existing operations and a construction work force for new developments. It is felt that the new oversized plant will swell this figure by 10,000.

The most dramatic aspect of the demography of Fort McMurray at this time is its almost complete absence of oil sands plant employees among the Towns people. Beginning in 1990, plant employees and their families began a migration which has concluded recently, from McMurray to the outlying new towns.

The motivation seems to have been primarily a desire to be closer to work; however, the heavy demands for housing in McMurray by the professional and service sectors effectively drove industry wage employees out of the community. The existence of ten major hotels in McMurray is evidence of the draw which McMurray represents for shopping and business trips from the new towns.

The most significant changes in McMurray as evidenced in this year 2000 are the complete removal of vehicular traffic and residences from the lower town. Given over completely to offices, hotels and shopping centres, the lower valley found itself too congested to allow entry of motor vehicles into the area, relying instead upon a complex transit system for the C.B.D. which ties into the inter-urban rail service. The long term projection for the C.B.D. indicates that it will be completely developed within a quarter century, with the roadways and other open spaces built over. The value of land in this area now being in the proximity of $2 million an acre has resulted in a minimum development viability of 30 stories for each new development. With the employment of a flood control



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mechanism on the Athabasca and Clearwater Rivers ten years ago, the C.B.D. has built to the banks of each of the rivers, and a plan has been proposed to build over the Clearwater. It is now some time since the development of the municipal slopes was commenced, with Abasands being the first completed. It is expected that by 2010 the valley between Beacon Hill and Abasands will be infilled with tower construction.

We will not take time to fully describe the region transportation system beyond what has been said already except to describe the Lynton inter-modal facility which has recently been opened. This facility provides, under one roof, connections between the McMurray International Airport, the inter-urban rail system and the inter-metropolitan bus system as well as the C.B.D. transit operation. Completed at a cost of $75 million, the inter-modal facility was directly based on the English system of transportation integration and spurred in large part due to the unavailability of land, the high cost of fuel, now retailing for gasoline at $5. per litre. The elimination of the Edmonton Municipal Airport in 1992 and the shift in ridership from Edmonton International to McMurray were prime reasons for the construction of the facility. The granting of S.S.T. privileges shortly after the construction go-ahead in 1996 to serve Western Canada guaranteed the role of McMurray International as a major centre for Western traffic. All Northern traffic, of course, at this time is channeled through McMurray.

THE FIRST STEPS: McMURRAY TO 1990

OPERATIONALIZATION

Before any plan for North Eastern Alberta will be realized which will allow an active rather than reactive local role, it will be imperative that two fundamental assumptions become accepted in Edmonton and Calgary at the earliest opportunity:

1. That the future of Canada lies in its mid-Canadian territory, an area in which McMurray is centrally located, as is Churchill Falls and Leaf Rapids.
2. That the new communities in mid-Canada will seek for, and demand not only autonomy but an integral role in local and regional policy making as it affects, directly or indirectly, their area of jurisdiction.

The unfortunate mode for Canadian Provincial Capitals at this time in terms of resource development is the international underdevelopment scenario, where resources are extracted from an underdeveloped area, no or only small concessions are made to local needs, and the local social and economic milieu is totally dependent upon exterior forces. These exterior forces will study the locals but few results will be realized from this research. A few amenities will be provided by the senior governments but as the locals will be oftimes perceived as spoiled children, they will be defined as unappreciative.

Fort McMurray will soon be providing over 15% of Canadian crude oil requirements and if the official government projections come through, this figure will rise dramatically over the next two decades. McMurray has often expressed itself to industry and government as a willing, but unaccepted "partner" to the oil sands development business: certainly such basic problems as employee turnover and family adjustment will not be resolved without direct local government involvement.

A meaningful role for local government in the oil sands development region is dependent upon, in the first instance, a measure of autonomy, but more importantly, the local governments will require data and sound projections on development plans to allow these jurisdictions to respond to future needs and possibilities in a mature and business like way. At the moment, the municipality is not even considered a consulting party to the planning and development of the immediate area of the municipality. On a specific level, the reduction in size of Improvement District 18 and the establishment of I.D. Administration in Fort McMurray is considered a necessity. This redefined I.D. should then be placed under a Planning and Development Commission with significant powers, requiring an integration of existing and new regional and local plans for the region. The Government of Alberta, at this latter point, should then confirm, by some means, the planned transportation network from the region. Transportation will be the key for McMurray's future regardless of the development and accommodation scenario adopted by industry and government.

Finally, the local authorities in the region must be given access to working capital to allow these jurisdictions to move beyond the current day to day necessity to manipulate the budget to a balanced position. The continuing financial difficulties have two negative effects: it saps energy at the local level, thus discouraging initiative in the "soft" program areas; it maintains a credibility gap between citizens, the government and the industry which must be closed if significant issues and problems are to be addressed in an integrated fashion, the only approach which it is felt will work under these circumstances.

Alberta needs a winner in Fort McMurray, just as the bombed out cities of Western Europe are todays showpieces of tourism, so too would it be of great credit to the Province were they able to turn to Fort McMurray as an example of the proper way to manage heavy industrial or resource related development.

McMurray will continue to be the point of visitation of international politicians and oil executives. Alberta needs a better product to display than that which is in place at present. These visiting officials are interested in more than the pipes and fittings of an oil plant: they are very interested in the social fabric which supports, and results from these plants. The measure of a government, in the eyes of these officials, is not how well technology is handled, but how well social administration is handled. Any number of major contractors can produce an oil sands plant, but only Alberta is presented with the opportunity to produce a social infrastructure success story in the near term.

There are dollars and cents reasons for such a Provincial Government initiative at this time. If McMurray can be marketed as a very desirable place to live, and remain, the direct savings to the oil industry would be in the magnitude of millions annually due to reduced employee turnover and improved morale. Hundreds of millions of people around the world believe that they will be younger, and seem to be younger, if they drink Pepsi or Seven-Up: this being merely a function of the power of advertising. What we need is Pride, and this we cannot attain on our own.

The challenge, and the opportunity, are there for the Government of Alberta in Fort McMurray. It is a time for initiative and confidence, and sound planning between the parties and the oil sands development industry. It is not a time for historical research and sabre thrashing; the time and conditions of world oil demand will simply not allow it.

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